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Concerning The Heyokah

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Hello, people! Before I get to the subject of this little piece, let me give you a bit of information as to its roots.

Recently I have been doing a lot of writing, horror stories for the most part, and this article grew out of that. It is also derived from a dream that I had not too long ago and something that has puzzled me until recently. Now, with all that out of the way, let's get to it.

Those of you who are familiar with Native American beliefs already have an idea of what a heyokah is. For the benefit of those who aren't, I'll try to briefly describe him for you. Who knows? There may well be a counterpart in your own tradition.

The word heyokah comes from the Lakotah (Sioux) and is used in reference to a particular type of shaman. According to tradition, the heyokah is one who has "dreamed of the Thunder Spirits." This dream bestows great powers upon the medicine man/medicine woman, one of which is reputed to be an ability to influence storms. However, these powers have their price in that the shaman becomes a "contrary/" If you've seen the movie Little Big Man, then you have seen a sample of the heyokah's antics. Of course, this was a parody of the real thing, but our subject does do a lot of clowning around in reverse.

Now I've read quite a bit on the subject (there's a lot out there, too), but still couldn't put it together. There seemed to be something missing! It's only in the last month or so that it's become clear to me and I'd like to share my insights with you.

Probably the greatest barrier to my understanding was the one created by language. Not being able to speak Lakotah, and additionally not knowing the culture, I lost something in the translation. Here's the whole picture, as I see it anyway.

In his vision, the heyokah comes into direct contact with the life-force itself. This is symbolized by the Thunder Spirits that he dreams of. When this occurs, a death/rebirth sequence is begun, which gives the shaman the capacity to control some of the manifestations of life-force. This would include an ability to influence storms and, as is typical of the shamanic experience, the power to heal. He also becomes a very potent teacher. This last is where the "contrariness" comes into focus, in two ways. The first is that the heyokah is teaching us about our selves. By "mirroring" all of our doubts, fears, hatreds, weaknesses, etc. he forces us to examine what we really are. For

example, if you have any self-hatred (a common malady in our society) this sacred teacher will make you look at it. The second aspect of his mirroring is that, as we are taught, the heyokah heals us of our hurts. This is the most important and remarkable part of the holy man's clowning. For this wonderful shaman takes our pain and transforms it into laughter. And what can heal a human beings faster than to laugh at ourselves?

As you can see, these "sacred clowns" had a very important role in traditional societies. And personally, I think we could use a few more of them in today's world.

Suggested Reading

- SEVEN ARROWS, Hyemeyosts Storm.
- SONG OF HEYOKAH, Hyemeyosts Storm.
- LAME DEER: SEEKER OF VISIONS, Richard Erdoes and Lame Deer.
- SHAMANIC VOICES, Joan Halifax.

If anyone would like to respond to this or has anything to share with me, please write to me c/o Post Office Box 11125, Englewood, CO 80110

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